

“Ritual: Rich, Warm, Full and...”  
for the UU District of Metro NY Annual Meeting  
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**OPENING WORDS:**

Good morning and welcome. Together let us seek to be a liberal religious community seeking transformation in our hearts, our homes, our community and our world.

Byrd Baylor wrote about ritual:

A new day needs to be honored.

People have always known that.

Didn't they chant at dawn in the sun temples of Peru?

And leap and sway to Aztec flutes in Mexico?

And drum sunrise songs in the Congo?

And ring a thousand small gold bells in China?

We gather together, a community of memory and a community of hope and we light our chalice as we begin our worship.

**READINGS:**

The First reading is from, *Mythic Reflections: Thoughts on myth, spirit, and our times*, an interview with Joseph Campbell, by Tom Collins:

Campbell is answering a question on the role of ritual: [Throughout time,] a ritual is the enactment of a myth. And through the enactment it brings to mind the implications of the life act that you are engaged in. Now, people ask me, what rituals can we have today? My answer is, what are you doing? What is important in your life? What is important, they say, is having dinner with their friends. *That* is a ritual.

Our second reading is from the book, “From the Beginning to End: The Ritual of Our Lives,” Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum writes:

“From beginning to end,  
The rituals of our lives shape each hour, day, and year.  
Everyone leads a ritualized life:  
Rituals are repeated patterns of meaningful acts.  
If you are mindful of your actions, you will see the ritual patterns.  
If you see the patterns, you may understand them.  
If you understand them, you may enrich them.  
In this way, the habits of a lifetime become sacred.

Is this so?”

## **SERMON:**

The title of my sermon this morning is, “Ritual: Rich, Warm, Full and...” This past weekend, I found myself up in Boston at the Spring Meeting of the UUA Board of Trustees. It was a great meeting, and as many of you may know, my last one as your representative on the UUA Board. What you may not know though, is that one of the bigger challenges for me, over the past four years, has been to uphold the honor of our own NY Yankees, during the playoffs or other regular season series; it’s all been a struggle. Being swept by the Red Sox this past weekend didn’t make anything any easier.

But then as I began thinking about this morning’s sermon, and the theme of ritual, the idea of baseball, as one of our culture’s more ritualized past times, came to mind. And one particular story, “A Bad Day in Brandon,” is one of my favorite baseball stories ever. The truth is that I first heard this story told right here at the Metro Annual Meeting by my friend and colleague, Rev. Mary Tiebout, about ten years ago. It bears repeating...

Maxon Eddy, born in Middlebury, VT in 1907, wrote the story. Between the time the story occurred and the time of its publishing, Mr. Eddy became a doctor and spent many years volunteering in hospitals in developing countries such as Indonesia, Haiti, Ethiopia, and Nepal.

### “A Bad Day in Brandon” by Maxon Eddy (Slightly abridged)

When I was 15 years old, I learned why baseball rulebooks are so fat. To allow the umpires any leeway in interpretation of the rules can be a disaster. It all has to be spelled out in infinite detail. And yet they must make interpretations at times, and we cannot legislate common sense among umpires any more than morality can be legislated among lawmakers.

The baseball game between Middlebury and Brandon High School on May 23, 1923, a day that will live in infamy, was [held] at Brandon. We liked to play Brandon, a school about our size, a team about our equal in its lack of talent.

I was the pitcher for the team, not because I could do it well; no one else could do it at all. These games went very slowly, primarily because of time spent retrieving the ball thrown wildly to the catcher or a member of the infield. The day had progressed into the early evening. Light was fading. We were in the bottom of the 11<sup>th</sup> inning with the score tied 17 to 17. Most of the spectators had wearied of the game ever ending and had gone home.

I must tell you about the ball itself. A league baseball cost 50 cents, and our budget allowed for only two. The better one of our two had been scooped up by a small dog that irretrievably hid it in a low air space under a nearby house. The one we were playing with had lost its cover during the seventh inning and had been repaired with layers of black electric tape over the original cover, the customary method of salvage.

Now, here we were in the bottom of the 11<sup>th</sup> inning with Brandon batting. There were two outs and no one was on base. If I could fan their best hitter, Lou Harrar, who was at bat, we would still have a chance.

Ray Fisher, a friend of my father and one of Middlebury College’s baseball greats, who had gone on to honorably win a game for the Cincinnati Reds in the scandalous World Series of 1919 against the Chicago White Sox, had shown me a special pitch—a “jump ball.” Now was the time

to use it. I rubbed the ball in my hands; its condition was tenuous. The ribbons of tape were frayed and loose, but I thought it would last. I reared back and threw it as hard as I could with a counter-clockwise twist of the wrist. It flapped and whizzed its journey to the plate, which it crossed dead center, belt high, without the slightest "jump" – a perfect home run pitch.

In the dimming twilight I saw the batter swing and then I heard the whirr of the ball, like a partridge flying over my head. I followed its course to about halfway between second base and center field and at that point I watched it, like a partridge hit broadside, disintegrate and flutter miserably to the ground in fragments.

Zenas Bliss was not only our center fielder and the brightest boy in the class, but he also held the record for consecutively consuming more dishes of Joe Calvi's chocolate ice cream covered with sauce, nuts, and whipped cream than anyone else. However, neither his gastric capacity nor his remarkable ability to translate Caesar helped him much in the field. His width equaled his height—when viewed from the rear, he presented the pyramid shape of a sitting rabbit. I could hear him rolling in from center field.

Lou Harrar, the runner, was galloping around second base thumbing his nose at me as he went. Then I could see Zenas working back and forth across the field like a bird dog searching for the ball. Finally he found it in a high hummock of grass surrounding a lagoon of dry cow dung as the runner rounded third base and headed for home. With a sidearm motion and a grunt, Zenas flung the ball fragment toward home plate, which it reached just in time for our catcher, Fanny Corvin, to tag the runner out in a cloud of dust.

We were overjoyed. We jumped up and down banging each other on the back. It was the third out, the score was still tied and we had another chance. At the height of our elation we were paralyzed by a shout of, "Safe! He's safe!" It came from the umpire who was standing at the plate turning something over in his hands.

We charged at him. I thrust my jaw into his ugly face and screamed, "What do you mean 'Safe?' He was out by a mile. Everybody saw it!"

The umpire raised the fragment of baseball and wad of black tape in his hand. "This is not a ball; this is smaller than a half piece of the ball." He pulled a rulebook out of his back pocket and waved it above his head. Then he thrust his jaw in my ugly face and screamed, "The rule book says an unforced runner must be tagged out with the ball. This is not the ball—the ball is out there [somewhere] in the field. He's safe."

We stood there in stunned silence as he added, "And the rule book says the opinion of the umpire is final!"

I wonder if any of the characters in the story are more easy to identify with for you. Sometimes for me, it's Zenas Bliss!

So, what are some of the salient points and useful analogies we might find in this story? People are drawn; we are drawn by ritual. Rituals have rules and interpretation of those rules can sometimes leave us wanting. We come to know ourselves and our world through ritual. Sometimes we mend things well enough – black electrical tape and all – so that we can carry on the ritual, carry on with life. Ritual invites us to rest easily when it's time to rest, and to play our hardest and do our best when it is time to act. It provides us venues to celebrate elation and to grieve our losses. Ritual never, never needs to remove the element of mystery or the possibility

of surprise. And it provides us time and place – this game is over; we'll come back and play again on another day – a place for stopping off and for beginning again.

People are drawn; we are drawn by ritual. Our lives unfold in stories that are punctuated by ritual. Babies are born and are then welcomed, named and dedicated through ritual. Children grow and come of age, fall in love and are married (or Civil Unioned – we're going to have to do a bit more work on that one) through various rituals and ritual processes. Each of us comes to an end, and if we are fortunate enough to have been loved along the way, we are bid farewell through rituals by our loved ones.

We have our own rituals and we have our shared rituals. From week to week in our Sunday morning worship services in our various congregations, we have rituals that welcome us into those communities, rituals that tell us we are home, that give us comfort and solace, that tell us in some important ways who we are and who we are becoming.

As in any faith community from the beginning of human time, we Unitarian Universalists have and continue to develop the rituals around which our communal life stories also unfold and by which they too are punctuated. Rituals need to change and grow in order to stay relevant and alive. We have our Chalice Lightings, joys and concerns, our music, our prayers and meditations, even our sermons, our Water Communion and Fire Communion, and so many of the things we do are remembered patterns that welcome us and give us comfort. They make a difference in our lives *and prepare us for going back out into the world so that we might make a difference in the world with our lives.*

And that's what's at the heart of all of this, at least as I see it. Ritual is not an invitation to deny our lives or insulate and isolate ourselves from them, from one another, or from our world. Rituals are not an end in themselves but are a part of a larger whole. They are a spiritual and religious process by which we gain deeper access, not only to the meaning of our lives but also to their directions; not only to where we have been, but to whom and to where we are called to be, to where we are going.

I don't have to tell you that we live in challenging times. Talk about trying to find the largest chunk of a shattered ball...the news in just the past couple of weeks has been enough to keep any infielder or outfielder in earnest search for any significant piece of meaning or direction.

A couple of weeks ago, Don Imus made horribly disparaging remarks about our wonderful New Jersey, Rutgers University Women's Basketball Team. His derogatory remarks were not only injurious to the team but to every woman and every person of color.

Last week, Cho Seung-Hui went on a maddening shooting spree that left 32 helpless victims dead at Virginia Tech, setting off a reverberating web of loss and grief. Seung-Hui lived in a country where it was perhaps the easiest place in the world, to obtain the weapons and the ammunition necessary to carry out such attacks.

I've spoken with several couples recently, gay and lesbian couples in New Jersey, who are struggling to try and figure out the meaning of subscribing to the idea of a relationship defined as a Civil Union. It's already clear that the difference between that term and the word *marriage* is rife with continued discrimination and the denial of civil rights. But still there are benefits, increased benefits that come from going through a Civil Union ceremony.

And this week our immoral war continued. I don't know how many U.S. troops died this week, although we know that the numbers are increasing lately. I don't know how many Iraqis died, although we know this was a particularly high week for them, too. And who knows how many have been wounded. When the Parliament building in Baghdad was attacked a couple of weeks ago by a suicide bomber, there were many casualties and fatalities. Our President's response was to tell the American people that those responsible for the attack have the very same plans to attack Americans here at home. He continues to tell the very same lies that got us into this war, fanning the flames of fear that supposedly only he and this administration are capable of quelling. The reality is that our security is at greater peril.

And there have been so many other difficult issues in our world this week, the genocide in Darfur, the ongoing impoverishment of children, the continuing rise of global warming, and others...

We live amidst that world, where it is so difficult to find even a decent sized chunk of meaning and direction. And so we come together this morning to worship. We come together Sunday to Sunday in our congregations to worship, to practice our rituals, to find our meanings so that we will then be able to go out *in faith* into those uncomfortable places where we find and live our day to day lives. We come to worship the Spirit of Life – *All Life*. We come to worship, to practice our rituals in order to find in our transient lives that which connects us to what is permanent through the stream of life. We come to find what binds our individual experiences and explorations within a context that allows us to have faith in the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, and faith in the interdependent web of all existence, all beings; so that we can know more fully that what we do with our lives matters, that what we do together matters. So that we can know more fully that our spiritual well-being is integrally connected with the spiritual well-being of all that is. So that we can know that the spiritual path of integrity requires constant vigilance searching for truth and beauty, justice and compassion, so that then we can respond to what we find in the world – caringly, responsibly, and intentionally.

So here's why it's important for us to come together to practice our rituals, beyond meeting our own needs – it's in order to grow Unitarian Universalism in the world. It's important for us to grow our congregations until they're bursting at the seams. The world is longing for a more loving way to be, and for my money and for my life's energy, Unitarian Universalism is the best hope we have at getting there.

The world is full of bullies like Don Imus and others who promote misogyny, homophobia and racism. The world is filled with maddening hatred and bitterness, and with those who would stir the fires of insanity with semi-automatic weaponry. The world is filled with oppressors and the oppressed are women and children, people of ethnicity and color and disability and old age, members of the gay, lesbian and transgender communities and so many others. The world is filled with war and those who would wage war for financial benefit or for the love of power.

To a very large extent, and I believe this deeply, the reason why all these things are able to continue is because of religion and ideas of superhuman gods, personal gods, who communicate secretly with their followers, assuring them that they are loved and favored above all others. The

reason why these things are able to continue is because of religion and its propensity for divisiveness and its lack of appreciation for the unity of all things.

This world desperately needs Unitarian Universalism. The world needs a religion that builds ritual out of meaningful observance, builds faith out of the knowledge that we are united with everyone and everything, and that nothing is saved unless all is saved. We have to be very careful of arrogance here; ours is not the only religious way – it is one way. But it is the way that has called me into intentional community, and I suspect the way that has called all of us gathered here.

The only way I know how to try to give the world what I believe it needs is to grow Unitarian Universalism. We are here to be served and to have our spiritual needs met. No mistake about that. That's why we have our rituals – to meet our needs and to celebrate our joys. But, even more than that, we are here in an attempt to grow a religious message, our *salvific religious message*, in order to give the world a better loving chance.

We come to our congregations to be nourished, and so should we be. But there is a price for that nourishment that our membership pledges have nothing to do with. The price is putting ourselves on the line to promote a religious faith based in the unity of all things, within a world that is succumbing to a host of gods who regrettably divide it.

If we do our best though, there is good hope that there is still a chance...and that chance is our hope. Spring is a time for baseball and to sing of golden mornings, to hold the image of wholeness up so that we can see it as clearly as possible, so that we can see what it is we are working towards. May our rituals serve us well in helping us to lift up such a vision, for our selves and for the world. And may we be emboldened by that vision, and tireless in our efforts to invite and welcome others into it.

### **CLOSING WORDS**

Vision without action is a dream. Action without vision is simply passing the time away. Action with Vision though, is making a positive difference, by applying our principles and values to the art of living intentionally in our world. May we be the practitioners of a religious tradition bent on being a part of such a difference.

As our worship comes to an end, we extinguish our chalice and our service begins.